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AUTHOR	Buttram, Joan L.
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ABSTRACT

Utilization of focus groups, commonly used in marketing research, as the first step of program needs assessment, is examined in this report. Focus groups are useful in generating new data that have not been constrained by a preconceived evaluation format. The goal of focus groups is not consensus building, but identification of a variety of needs. A needs assessment study was conducted by a regional educational laboratory, in five locations across the northeastern United States. Thirty-five representatives from education, administration, business, and professional associations, generated from a list of nominations, participated in focus group discussions. The groups identified regional elementary and secondary educational needs and feasible types of assistance. Group feedback produced a significantly different list of needs than those generated previously by a mail survey. Earlier lists of needs focused on elementary and secondary problems, and the focus groups emphasized needs supportive of the instructional program. Focus groups' requests for assistance were congruent with available services. Findings indicate that, although limited to defining the educational status quo, focus groups are useful in providing input to improve survey design, enhance knowledge of clients' needs, and expand management concepts for future planning. (11 references (LMI)

Focus Groups: A Starting Point for Needs Assessment

Joan L. Buttram
Research for Better Schools, Inc.
444 N. Third Street
Philadelphia, PA 19123

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Introduction

Although most recently linked to market research (Krueger, 1988), evaluators' interest in focus groups has been sparked with the increasing acceptance of qualitative methodologies and emphasis on client reactions (Patton, 1987). Focus groups can be used by evaluators to explore individuals' perceptions about a broad range of topics and purposes (Krueger, 1988). For example, those most closely tied to marketing's use assess participants' reactions to a particular program, service, or product (McKillip, 1986). Focus groups also can be used to tap the perceptions of internal staff or other stakeholders. In addition, they can provide information about a program not just at its end, but at its beginning or mid-point. This paper will examine the use of focus groups at the start, as the first step in a broader needs assessment.

Most programs are designed to meet a set of perceived needs, usually for a targeted group of clients. To ensure that program designers clearly understand the needs of the target group, needs assessments are often conducted, either formally or informally (Stufflebeam, McCormick, Brinkerhoff, & Nelson, 1985). Although most program planners would probably argue that they know what their clients need, too many programs have failed because of mismatched services. It's therefore imperative to assess, or confirm clients' needs (Rossi & Freeman, 1982).

Deciding what the needs of clients are is no easy task. One standard technique is to ask members of the target group (or their representatives) to react to a set of needs already listed in some form (Patton, 1982; Rossi & Freeman, 1982). Their reactions, in turn, are used to design appropriate program services or products.

To many evaluators, this initial listing of potential needs presents

the classic "Catch-22." How should the evaluator decide what client needs to include in the initial list? And how can this list not bias the client's response? As Krueger (1988, p. 19) notes, respondents are "limited by the choices offered and, therefore, the findings could be unintentionally influenced...by oversight or omission." The validity of the needs assessment is consequently dependent on the perceptiveness of the evaluator (or others) who drew up the initial list.

Since most formal needs assessments involve large numbers of individuals, more open-ended assessments that do not supply a predetermined list of needs are seldom feasible. Yet it is in these very instances that needs assessments are so crucial to ensuring that the program will be responsive to the target group. Focus groups, as described below, can help resolve the dilemma involved in developing that initial list (Krueger, 1988).

Methodology

A focus group typically involves six to eight individuals from a target group who participate in a structured discussion (Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988). A needs assessment focus group will address the problems (or needs) of group members to which the program might respond (Krueger, 1988). During the session, the moderator will focus the group's discussion on identifying and delineating those needs. Since a focus group is not meant to arrive at a consensus around a particular topic (Morgan, 1988), the discussion will most likely produce a variety of needs to be addressed, some shared by the entire group and some particular to one or more individuals in the group. The evaluator will still be faced with the task of developing a final list of needs, but the task will be carried out from a more client-centered vantage point. Convening multiple focus groups on the same topic can help

to validate and reinforce needs identified by individual groups.

This technique was used as the first step of a needs assessment conducted by Research for Better Schools (RBS), a regional educational laboratory, as part of its planning for an upcoming program planning cycle (Buttram, 1989). Previous needs assessments conducted by RBS relied on analyses of demographic and educational status reports to identify a list of needs that constituents, in turn, were asked to rate via a widely distributed mail survey (Buttram, 1985). Constituent ratings were aggregated and laboratory programs were proposed to meet highly rated needs. During the current planning cycle, focus groups were substituted for literature reviews in generating the initial survey list of needs.

Focus groups were conducted by RBS in five locations across the region (i.e., Baltimore, Harrisburg, New Brunswick, Philadelphia, Washington, DC). A list of candidates was developed for each location based on internal staff nominations. Staff were asked to nominate individuals from particular constituent groups (e.g., local school districts, state education agencies, intermediate units) or critical stakeholders in the educational community (e.g., higher education, professional associations, business and industry) who would be thoughtful, informed discussants about regional educational needs. Personal invitations were sent from the executive director of the laboratory to candidates; follow-up telephone calls were made by the senior level staff member in charge of the laboratory's needs assessment. The follow-up calls served to answer any questions candidates might have and to gain their commitment to participate. The invitations were generally sent four to six weeks ahead of the planned date to minimize scheduling conflicts; however, scheduling still posed a problem and approximately 70 individuals were contacted before sufficient numbers were recruited.

Of the 43 individuals who agreed to participate, 35 actually attended a focus group session (81.4 percent). They represented a cross-section of the groups identified above. The sessions were held at neutral, easily accessible locations (i.e., RBS, private conference centers at other locations, and a hotel conference room). At four of the five sessions, the groups were seated around a conference table, at the fifth session they sat in a circle around a coffee table. Participants were provided at the start of the session with a list containing all of their names, positions, and addresses. Light refreshments (e.g., cold drinks, cookies, fruit) were served and travel costs were reimbursed when requested.

The moderator (the director of the laboratory's needs assessment) started each session by explaining the purpose of the meeting, reviewing the basic ground rules for the focus group, and asking participants to introduce themselves. A brief overview of RBS (e.g., mission of the laboratory, size, annual budget, and services provided to the region) was provided since some participants had little previous knowledge or contact with the laboratory. The executive director of the laboratory, also present, added other relevant information as appropriate.

Once these introductions were completed, the moderator turned the groups' attention to the two discussion questions. The first question asked participants to identify the needs facing elementary and secondary education in the region. The groups typically spent 60-75 minutes addressing this question before the moderator turned their attention to the second question. The second question asked them what types of assistance would be beneficial in meeting those needs; this discussion generally lasted 45-60 minutes. Participants were encouraged to respond to both questions from their particular perspective. The moderator and executive director asked

clarifying questions when necessary; otherwise, they allowed the exchange to flow at the participants' direction and pace.

The five sessions were closed by the executive director who thanked participants for their time. In addition, RBS promised to send participants a summary of the results when the five focus groups were completed.

Analysis

The sessions were taped and transcripts prepared at a later date. Transcripts generally were 25-30 pages long. In order to analyze the data, the moderator read each transcript several times. The first reading helped to refresh her memory of the groups' discussions. During the next several readings, text passages describing a need facing elementary or secondary education (question one) were highlighted. Once the text had been marked for needs, several additional readings were completed to highlight text passages identifying the types of assistance needed (question two). Different color highlighters were used to make sure the two sets of passages stood out.

Protocols were then developed to code each set of highlighted text. This involved reading each passage and assigning a short descriptor to it (i.e., increase school's capacity to change, decrease impact of social ills on schools, disseminate effective school practices) and highlighted passages were coded. Separate descriptors were developed for the two sets of passages. Descriptors were reused from one transcript to another, whenever possible, in order to identify common themes in participants' comments within and across the five focus groups.

Once all of the highlighted passages were coded, the next step was to count the number of times each descriptor was used. Comments made by

different participants on the same topic were counted separately. Comments made by the same individual on the same topic also were counted separately if they occurred at different points during the session; however, if they clustered together as part of an ongoing exchange, they were only counted once. The frequency counts for each descriptor were rank ordered for each focus group and for all five groups. This analysis plan is based on the premise that the final rankings should reflect the number of times a particular need or type of assistance was raised during the focus group discussion(s). In other words, final rankings are dependent on the number of times participants raised similar topics or returned to topics mentioned earlier.

The descriptors and frequency counts were organized into summary tables for the five focus groups separately and overall. In addition, a second summary was prepared that listed each descriptor and three or four passages from the text to further explain the need or type of assistance descriptor. The top ranked needs and types of assistance were used as the list of variables to be prioritized in a larger needs assessment survey conducted at a later date. The results also were shared internally with laboratory staff.

Results and Conclusions

Input obtained from the five focus groups resulted in a significantly different list of needs than those generated previously. Earlier lists of needs focused on the usual litany of elementary and secondary education ills, such as the need to improve basic skills and higher order thinking skills of students (Buttram, 1985). In marked contrast, the focus groups' discussions tended to emphasize needs that would support the instructional

program (e.g., involve teachers and parents in school decisionmaking, modify school organizational structures to enhance instruction) rather than attack the instructional program directly (Buttram, 1989). The needs expressed by participants also were more dynamic and process-oriented than previous lists (e.g., increase schools' capacity to change, enhance teacher commitment and student involvement in learning). In essence, focus group participants were asking for assistance in improving the conditions in which educators work so that they could focus their energy on student learning.

These types of requests for assistance are in keeping with how RBS' role as a regional R&D organization has developed over the past ten years. RBS now is much more geared to providing assistance in planning, development, training, and evaluation than to providing direct classroom assistance in specific instructional content areas or methods. These changes have occurred because of reductions in federal funding, increased political pressure to provide services to large numbers of SEAs and LEAs across the region, and decreased support for large-scale, transportable curriculum improvement efforts. The types of requests for assistance identified by focus group participants thus more readily fit RBS' (and regional educational laboratories, in general) strategies for working in partnerships with SEAs and LEAs to improve schools. As a result, they will provide better direction to the laboratory in planning its future school improvement work (Kaufman, 1988; Research for Better Schools, 1985).

There was moderate overlap across the five focus groups in their identification of needs and assistance. Variations occurred because of the mix of participants, local or state contexts, and breaking educational news. In terms of raw numbers, focus group participants were able to identify more needs in the region than types of assistance that might be beneficial

(Buttram, 1989). Thirty-nine different needs were mentioned 278 times by focus group participants in contrast to 28 types of assistance mentioned 79 times. In addition, the latter were fairly simplistic and traditional in scope (e.g., disseminate research findings and exemplary programs, broker training services). These differences are probably attributable to their lack of knowledge and/or experience with a wide range of R&D services. Not surprisingly, these findings suggest that focus groups are well-suited for defining the status quo, but not particularly productive in identifying future options. The latter may be better addressed in brainstorming sessions that are directed at solving particular problems (Krueger, 1988).

Results of the overall needs assessment survey strongly supported the value of the focus groups in providing input to the design of the survey. Because particular needs were discussed in-depth by educators at all levels, they greatly enhanced RBS' knowledge and understanding of clients' needs. In addition, the focus groups helped stimulate the laboratory management to think in broader and more ambitious terms in planning future work in the region. Although the time investment in setting up and conducting the focus groups and the resulting analyses were considerable, the development of the large-scale needs assessment survey and the usefulness of the survey results were dramatically improved.

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